

INTEGRATING OBSOLETE MILITARY BUILT HERITAGE INTO URBAN LIFE. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WITHIN THE VALORIZATION OF BRIALMONT'S FORTIFICATIONS IN ROMANIA AND BELGIUM.

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Abstract. Architectural obsolescence acts as a catalyst in the process of abandonment, exerting a considerable influence on the destiny of built heritage. In the context of military edifices, this concept pertains to the decommissioning of a building, due to its inability to remain aligned with the fast-paced advancements in technology. Military built heritage is frequently the subject of abandonment due to ignorance of its patrimonial values, the absence of adequate protection measures and a lack of community engagement. The consequences of this type of anthropogenic disaster affect both the tangible and the intangible values of these structures, leading to: fragmentation, collapse, vandalism, loss of symbolic identity and disconnection from the urban fabric. The current state of the Bucharest Fortress, designed by H. Brialmont, reflects the narrative of an unfulfilled destiny. The disarming of the fortifications in 1916 marked the commencement of decay and decline, resulting in the abandonment of the majority of the ensemble. Conversely, the defense belts built by the same general in Belgium, during approximately the same period, have been revitalised as a result of community involvement. In the light of the aforementioned cases, this essay aims to showcase a comparative analysis between the current state of Brialmont's fortifications in Romania and Belgium, with regard to the role that community plays in the valorization of built military heritage. The paper will be developed by means of bibliographic, historical and comparative research, focusing on how participatory initiatives, linked to preservation and adaptive reuse, can instill a sense of ownership and facilitate the cultural integration of the Bucharest Fortress, based on the successful examples of Liège, Namur and Antwerp. This study is essential for highlighting the vital role that communities play in the fate of abandoned military built heritage, representing the pivotal factor, able to revitalize the Romanian fortification belt.

Introduction. Military constructions that have become redundant are oftentimes affected by the anthropogenic disaster, represented by abandonment, as a consequence being disregarded by the community and excluded from the urban life. The complexity of each constructive typology, the relationship with the topography of the site and the historical traumatic imprint make buildings, specific to this architectural programme, unique in their morphology and memorial value [1]. Military buildings are capable of evoking a profound representation of national identity, encompassing the geopolitical, economic and social factors that have shaped the construc-

tion techniques employed for defense purposes. Emanating a certain atmosphere which is more challenging to address, a sensitive approach is required when implementing an adaptive reuse project. The manner in which these edifices are presented to the public must take into account the symbolism of the site within the collective memory, and thus convey a positive and respectful perspective for its future use [2].

The decommissioning of the defensive structures, built by the Belgian general, both in Romania and Belgium, led to the scission of the ensemble, each fort being owned by a different stakeholder. As time passes, the materiality of the buildings was affected by fragmentation, decay, contamination and vandalism, arriving in a state in which their identity is unrecognisable. Consequently, it is difficult for the community to perceive in a coherent manner the immense value of each military complex in the absence of a holistic action plan [3]. Oblivion frequently takes over the immobile military heritage assets, being rooted in the fact that the individuals do not identify on a personal level with the site in question. The underlying cause of this situation can be attributed to the lack of public engagement initiatives, which are essential for fostering a strong emotional connection between humans and the built environment.

With regard to the valorization process, the inclusion of a civic participatory component into the redevelopment of obsolete military heritage is essential, as this is a crucial factor in ensuring the long-term viability and contextual relevance of the building within the urban fabric.

In the framework of the subject highlighted above, when addressing the case studies of military built heritage management in Belgium, in comparison to Romania, it is noticeable that the role of community engagement has a significant impact on the success of rehabilitation programmes (Figure 1). With regard to the management of Brialmont fortifications in Antwerp, Liège and Namur, this revitalisation tool is employed in an appropriate manner in accordance with the type of ownership specific to each fort, always focusing on the inclusion of citizens' needs and desires.

The objective of the present paper is focused on the following research question: how can the valorization of the Brialmont forts in Belgium be used as a good practice model in the case of the Bucharest fortifications?

This article addresses the underexplored analogy between the present state of the fortifications in these two instances through a comparative analysis, focused on the effectiveness of resident involvement strategies. It aims to highlight the possible actions that can be considered in order to bring the defensive ensemble of Bucharest to the state of the Belgian ones by identifying a set of success factors, based on the application of the Communication Model of Built Heritage Assets (COBA).

Weaving the bond between the community and the immobile military heritage. Attaining a profound connection to a building, moreover to an abandoned one, assures the commitment of the individual in the quest of safeguarding and raising awareness to other residents as well, being convinced by an optimistic glimpse into a thriving future destined for the built heritage. The necessary basis for obtaining such a result is grounded in the process of identifying with the military built asset on both a social and personal level.

When using the comparative analysis research method, the case studies will be discussed in analogy with the principles of the Communication Model of Built Heritage Assets (COBA), defined by Matthias Ripp and Susanne Hauer [4]. This strategy is centered around the integration of the objectives presented by the World Heritage Committee, precisely the “Five Cs”: credibility, conservation, capacity-building, communication and communities [5]. The success of the public engagement initiatives, part of the valorization process of the Brialmont forts in Belgium, is a result of an effective management of the five steps proposed for the development of the identification process: definition, awareness, exploration, participation and transfer [6]. Each type of interaction between the public and the built heritage asset changes progressively the perspective of the citizens. According to the COBA model, it is essential to involve a multisensorial approach in this strategy in order to form memory bonds and engage the human in the process of comprehending the layers of history and the potential of the site.

Starting from the initial state of oblivion and ignorance, the attitude of the individual is gradually shifting as a result of taking part in several initiatives meant to inform, raise awareness and encourage the exploration and participation (Figure 2). Consequently, reaching the final stage of individual commitment to the building’s revitalisation means that the gained experience is transferred to the other members of the community, acting as a catalyst for change.

The social identity is addressed in the scope of the first two ways of engaging, mainly consisting of identifying and understanding the history and importance of the site in question. The next phase, destined to create a connection with the personal identity, is oriented towards gaining information and actively participating in events related to heritage preservation. Lastly, once the final aim of the community engagement methods is reached, the level dedicated to communication and dissemination is attained, the residents are now being able to form a local network which gains its own power of raising awareness on the discussed topic [7].

The success of this entire process of binding the community and the built heritage is influenced by the way in which information on the subject is showcased. This aspect is highlighted in the guidebook of the acclaimed educational theorist, Étienne Charles Wenger, which stresses the importance of constantly updating the education tools in order to adapt to the interests and needs of the residents [8]. It is therefore crucial to include technology assets as components which have the potential of adding value to the visitors’ experience, attracting the attention of all age groups.

The role of community engagement in shifting the destiny of the forts. Depending on the architectural programme, specific to the built heritage asset, as in the case of the fortifications designed by general Brialmont, the community has a different attitude, being involved in a more direct or indirect manner, according to the role these edifices play in the cultural life. When it comes to the current relationship between the Bucharest Fortress and the residents, the research shows that many of the forts and batteries of the defense belt are inaccessible to the public, due to their assignment of military functions or being a private property.

Visitors do not derive any benefit from these generous and monumental spaces, with the exception of the sole structure that can be explored as a tourist attraction, Fort 13 Jilava, which is set to be transformed into a memorial museum [9]. With regard to the majority of the fortifications, they are explored and valued by small groups of individuals with a keen interest in military history. These citizens are willing to take considerable risks in order to gain access to the sites, which are in a state of advanced disrepair, overgrown with vegetation and some of them even being flooded.

The only initiative of engaging community in the revival of the Bucharest defense belt was the organization of the exhibition entitled *The capital’s forts, 30 images from the future*, having the aim of raising awareness on the subject [10]. Unfortunately, this event did not have a lasting impact on the public, due to its singularity and lack of visibility for diverse categories of people.

Addressing the actual state of the Belgian fortification belts, it is evident that the impact of the Second World War on the integrity of the forts is significant. The original form of these forts has been irrevocably altered as a result of the armed conflict. In the post-war period, the fate of the Brialmont-designed forts was determined by the Ministry of Defence and the cultural associations that took possession of them. In contrast to the Bucharest Fortress, a considerable number of forts have been utilised according to their memorial and historical significance, many of which have undergone restoration, conservation, and subsequent adaptive reuse. Some of the functions of the Brialmont fortifications include: museum, adventure park (Fort de Chaudfontaine), military device testing laboratory (Fort de Liers), accommodation and cultural events (Fort de Lantin), nature reserves, recreation area, event and coworking space (Fort 5 Edegem), exhibition and performance space (Fort 8 Hoboken), but also a playground for children (Fort Duffel) [11]. None of those actions would have been possible in the absence of a practice that highly values the civic involvement.

The intense sense of ownership that people have towards the built heritage asset is possible due to the presence of a diverse range of activities which address each step of the COBA model, in all three cities of Belgium. These initiatives are organized with the aid of heritage and environmental organisations, local municipalities and cultural institutions.

The definition and awareness phases are experienced with the aid of didactic exhibitions and flyers, and with the use of the latest technology advancements, the gamification is possible by using specialised apps (Fort de Saint-Héribert) and virtual reality platforms (Figure 3a). The guided tours, organised by the fort preservation associations, encourage people to explore and engage with both nature and the hidden historical symbolism of the site.

The participative component is materialized through creative endeavours, the most notable being: the organisation of Open Monument Day (Antwerp) and Occupation artistique d’un fort (Fort d’Emines, Namur) (Figure 3b) and FortBom Festival (Fort 4, Antwerp) [12]. These initiatives demonstrate the capacity of artists to revitalise and recapture the identity of defensive buildings, as well as to foster appreciation for the built heritage among the general public. Ultimately, the most important step which

ensures the continuity of the preservation actions towards the military ensembles is the transference. The multi-sensory approach is observed in the hosting of interactive activities such as workshops, local forums and volunteer events dedicated to conservation and restoration. One relevant example is the Summer in the Fort practice, taking place on the grounds of Fort Lier, which has gathered more than 1000 visitors. This represents an occasion for people to participate actively in the ever-changing process of adaptive reuse within the fortification belt of Antwerp, especially through the “dream the fort” exercise, in which more than 600 ideas from the community, envisioning the future functions of the building, were registered and publicly displayed [13]. With the involvement of local residents in these activities, the future cooperation with the cultural associations is strengthened and the network of NGOs is constantly developing.

Conclusion. Assessing the present situation of the valorization process of the Brialmont fortifications both in Romania and Belgium, it is obvious that the fortress of Bucharest is underutilised and currently hosts incompatible and damaging functions because people don't perceive its value and are not connected on a personal level with the heritage asset. Therefore, the only solution that could change the present situation is civic engagement with the help of volunteering organisations and cultural institutions, as well as applying the necessary legislation of preserving the military built heritage.

On the other hand, the case of Belgium, displaying a wide range of effective means of engaging the public, illustrates a set of success factors which serve as good practice examples for the “salvation” of the Bucharest fortress. The key elements of this strategy were: the involvement of all age groups, offering accessible and free information, activities which make use of all senses, focusing on the memorial and cultural values of the site in order to create identity bonds and following the five steps of the COBA model. These components are essential in the process of creating a shared memory and a community around the fortifications [14]. In this manner individuals will want to protect the buildings because they represent a significant part of their cultural life, as is the case with the powerful association Les Amis du Fort de Lantin, which is run by residents and old war prisoners since 1980 [15].

The positive outcomes of applying the COBA strategy include: the transfer of useful knowledge to the future generation, ensuring continuity of the preservation actions, value creation on a social, cultural and economical level in relation to the heritage asset and overall, generating a functional network of communication between private stakeholders, the residents and public institutions.

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Figures.

FIGURE 1 – Fort 6 Afumaţi. Source: <https://forturi.ro/2022/09/04/fortul-vi-afumati/>.

FIGURE 2 – Bicycle route connecting the Brialmont forts in Antwerp. Source: <https://www.pasar.be/artikel/fietsen-met-de-fiets-langs-de-brialmontforten>.

FIGURE 3 – Informative materials for all ages at Fort van Lier. Source: Masterplan Fort van Lier <https://www.lier.be/wonen-en-leven/stadsvernieuwing/projecten/patriomonium/fort-van-lier/masterplan>.

FIGURE 4 – Guided tours at Fort de St. Héribert. Source: <https://belgiumbattlefield.be/fit/node/52>.

FIGURE 5 – Virtual reality visit at Fort Flémalle. Source: <https://www.visitezliege.be/en/offre/fort-de-flemalle-et-son-musee>.

FIGURE 6 – Artist installation made by Georges Rousse for “Occupation artistique d’un fort” in Namur. Source: <https://www.province.namur.be/?rub=evenement&id=1403>.

